CURRENTS. A Journal of Young English Philology Thought and Review. Vol. 11/2025
Ed. E. Lorek-Jezińska, N. Strehlau, J. Porębska, www. currents.umk.pl
ISSN 2449-8769 ||

Marta Struglińska
University of Łódź

INVERTING THE MALE GAZE IN THE POETRY OF SEAMUS HEANEY AND MEDBH MCGUCKIAN

Keywords: *aisling* tradition, Irish poetry, colonialism, feminism, female agency

Literature is a part of larger cultural and political phenomena; nations use literature to construct their mythology and sometimes even to defend their sense of national identity from invaders and colonial influence. This also concerns Ireland, whose culture was strongly impacted by the decades of British rule. There are various genres, motifs, and themes created either by the then British imperialists to justify their occupation of Irish land, or by Irish people striving to keep their national identity. The latter can be represented by the *aisling* tradition. The word "aisling" means a vision or a dream ("Aislinge"). It originated as a Gaelic literary genre which can be found in ancient Irish texts connected mostly with sovereignty and love ("Aisling" 9). These texts usually told a story of a sacred kinship between the future ruler of the land and a female goddess symbolizing Ireland (or a specific part of it). This kinship ensured the transfer of power over the land from the goddess to the king (Apple 222). The *aisling* tradition changed in the eighteenth century, when it started to be used as a political tool to symbolically portray the situation of Ireland at that time. The image of Ireland personified as an ideal woman who comes to Irish men in their dreams, urging them to fight for their country, became the focus of the *aisling*. It was observed by Jerzy Jarniewicz that even

though such a portrayal could indicate to some people that in Irish culture the status of a woman is elevated, it soon became a symbol of her exclusion (175). On the one hand, a woman in the *aisling* tradition symbolized a pivotal issue for the Irish nation—its sovereignty and land. In the vision dreams central to the *aisling,* she inspired resistance for Ireland and represented something precious meant to be protected at all costs. However, on the other hand, the *aisling* tradition upheld a rigid, idealized image of womanhood that did not allow for the diversity of female experience. According to this image, the perfect woman was supposed to be pure, obedient, and quiet (a source of inspiration but not an independent entity with agency). Consequently, women who differed from this image were often marginalized and their attempts to express themselves were discouraged and ostracized.

Elizabeth Cullingford, a feminist literary critic, gives two reasons for the creation of such a personification of the Irish land. On the one hand, it was a way for Irish men to constrain Irish women and force them into a stereotype of pure and passive beings. On the other, it was used by British imperialists to justify the propaganda describing the whole Irish race in a pejorative way. It may have given the British the momentum to continue their "oppressive colonial strategies of representation" since their portrayal of the Irish as feminine was treated as proof of the latter's need for a masculine monarch (1).

In modern times, Irish feminists have started to point out how the *aisling* tradition imprisoned women and suppressed their sexuality. According to Clair Wills, the personification of Ireland as a woman in the post-colonial rhetoric has strongly influenced the post-colonial pursuit to reconsider aspects of Irish identity. The treatment of female sexuality is also currently a part of the discussion about the impact of the *aisling* tradition. Furthermore, the *aisling* tradition was also a factor contributing to the opposition between culture perceived as inherently male and nature perceived as female. Elizabeth Cullingford argues that this distinction confines women to passivity and silence (1). Katharina Walter further explains that one of the main reasons why women

poets in Ireland have been protesting against the tradition of symbolically portraying Ireland as a female figure is the oversimplification of both Ireland and femininity (2). Irish women poets have been striving to reverse harmful elements of the *aisling* tradition in their work by giving women a voice and agency. A great example of a poetess who succeeded in transforming the aisling tradition is Medbh McGuckian, who deconstructs it by adopting a female perspective in her works.

The strategy of changing the perspective from male to the female one corresponds to the process of inverting the male gaze, which is mentioned in the title of this article and will be an important reference in analysis. The term "male gaze" was first coined by Laura Mulvey in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975). Although Mulvey focuses on mainstream cinema in her paper, her observations can be applied to other fields of art. According to Mulvey, the male gaze can be defined as a dynamic in which a man is actively looking at a woman who is the passive object of that look as she "holds [it], plays to and signifies male desire" (11). Furthermore, Mulvey observes that "the image of a castrated woman" is a source of "order and meaning to its world" (6). This aspect shares a similarity with the *aisling* tradition, for even as a vision a woman serves the male subject in her representation of Ireland. Her identity is erased to become part of national mythology and provide Irish people with source of inspiration and strength to fight for their country. The gender division of the original dream—between the object and subject of gaze—parallels distribution of power and perspective described by Mulvey.

In what follows I will demonstrate the shift from the "male gaze" in Seamus Heaney's poetry to the "female action" in McGuckian's poems, comparing two poems by Heaney ("Act of Union" and "Ocean's Love to Ireland") with two poems written by McGuckian ("The Hollywood Bed" and "The Heiress"). These poems allude to the *aisling* tradition, yet they differ in their attitude towards it. There have been cases of literary critics comparing Heaney's and McGuckian's poetry, most notably juxtaposing "Act of Union" and "The Hollywood Bed"; for

example, the poets' different approaches were examined by Alison Garden and Kennedy-Andrews (see references). This article broadens the scope by including other poems by these authors ("Ocean's Love to Ireland" by Heaney and "The Heiress" by McGuckian). Its focus on the inversion of the *male gaze* allows for a feminist reading through the lens of the *aisling* tradition and its modern reinterpretations.

Seamus Heaney was born in 1939 in a Catholic family living in Northern Ireland, in County Derry. Therefore, he was part of an Irish native minority during the time in which sectarian violence had a huge impact on daily life. He is often believed to be "Ireland's greatest poet since Yeats" (Kearney 552). In his poetry, he was preoccupied with "images of mythology, archaeology and genealogy, of returning to forgotten origins" (552). Despite his recognition, his poetry (especially his more political poems) was at times regarded as controversial. Some critics even suggested that he contributed to the consolidation of the "myth of a never-ending Irish violence" (Quinlan 64). In 1969, when the crisis in Northern Ireland started, Heaney was already recognized as an important new voice in Ireland.

"Act of Union" and "Ocean's Love to Ireland" were included in the poetry collection titled *North,* which was published in 1975. This was the period during which Northern Ireland (Heaney's homeland) was in the most violent stage of the Troubles—a sectarian conflict between Protestant loyalists and Catholic nationalists that lasted from 1968 to 1998. This stage was marked by incidents such as the McGurk's Bar bombing clearly highlighting the political violence and bloodshed of that time. Within this context, the volume *North* created controversy, as it depended to a large extent on metaphorical gender dynamics. In these poems, Heaney presented and commented on Ireland's history and its colonization by pairing images of contemporary sectarian bloodshed with those drawn from the Iron Age. The second set of images was inspired by P.V. Glob's book titled *The Bog People,* published in 1969. Notably, *North* is the collection in which Seamus Heaney explores, as Brazeau notes, "the

relevance of mythology as a context for understanding contemporary political and social realities" (162).

Medbh McGuckian was born in 1950 in Belfast, in the generation of Northern Irish poets following Seamus Heaney's. Her childhood and youth spent in Belfast differ greatly from the experiences of Heaney in rural County Derry. In an interview with Michaela Schrage-Früh in 2005, McGuckian emphasized how she associated her hometown with poverty and unhappiness, even comparing it to a ghetto. Her style of writing has been often described as "dense, oblique, and at time cryptic" (Schrage-Früh 2). In her poetry, she uses images of domestic life and nature, focusing on themes of femininity and motherhood. McGuckian had a personal relationship with Seamus Heaney. He was her teacher during her studies at the Queen's University in Belfast and later on became her mentor. This acquaintance may explain why McGuckian refers to Heaney's poems in her own work.

"The Hollywood Bed" and "The Heiress" were published in 1993 as part of the volume titled *Flower Master and Other Poems.* At that time, Northern Ireland was still affected by the Troubles. The ongoing conflict drew people's attention to matters of Irish identity and national mythology. It is not surprising that McGuckian decided to include a discussion of these issues, especially in the context important for her (i.e., women's rights and freedoms). Schrage-Früh pointed out that in McGuckian's poetry "the political level is frequently obscured by a private domestic one" (2). However, this tendency started to change after the beginning of the Peace Process, when she began to address political issues more candidly. Her previous reluctance to do so may be a result of the fear for herself and her family since, in contrast to poets such as Seamus Heaney and Paul Muldoon, she chose to remain in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, the two poems analyzed in this article illustrate that she was already making allusions to sociopolitical problems before the Peace Process.

The analytical part of this article starts with the examination of the "Act of Union"[1] (Heaney 1975: 43). The title refers to the moment in history when the

colonization of Ireland by England became "politically official" (Armengol 12). The Act of Union of 1800 was crucial to later historical developments because it dissolved the Irish Parliament and "established the United Kingdom of Britain and Ireland" (Kelly 236). It is often referred to as the central issue in complicated Anglo-Irish relations and as the final stage of colonization.

The speaker in "Act of Union" (Heaney 1975: 43) is a powerful male figure (a symbol of England) who is talking to his female lover (a symbol of Ireland). The symbolism is evident in the comparison of the female body to the borders and landform of Ireland (in such lines as "your back is a firm line of eastern coast," "your gradual hills" and "heaving province"). Later on, images of the pregnancy and subsequent birth symbolize the emergence of Northern Ireland, further connecting the female body with Irish land.

Interestingly, despite the domination of the male speaker as his "legacy culminates inexorably" within her borders, he states that "conquest is a lie." The word "conquest" has two meanings. It can simply convey the act of conquering a country or a land which suits the nationalist aspect of the poem. However, it can also refer to a person whose favor or hand someone managed to win. If analyzed through the lens of the latter meaning, we can treat it as an admission on the part of the male figure to the involuntary participation of Ireland (the female figure) in this relationship. Neither her favor nor hand had been given freely to England; rather, it had been a forced union that brought benefits only to one side. On the other hand, if we choose to focus on the more literal meaning of the word "conquest," we can interpret it as Heaney's way to criticize British colonizers who sought to justify their actions in Ireland and lied about the true nature of their activity in this country. Both of these readings can suggest that, despite his rather faithful following of the power dynamic of the *aisling* tradition, Heaney noticed some of its harmful elements and decided to discuss them in his work.

However, despite this shift, the poem still contains elements reinforcing the patriarchal narrative of the *aisling* tradition. The male figure is a powerful

entity endowed with influence and agency. It has been pointed out by Joseph Armengol that the woman is restrained to silence and passivity, while the man is allowed to speak. It reflects the constraints that women were subjected to in Ireland. The woman in the poem is not a human being of flesh and blood but merely a "mythical representation of a traditionally feminine Ireland" (18). These types of portrayals of women in literature can strengthen existing stereotypes and assumptions about them.

An important aspect of the poem is the description of the sexual act, which has been interpreted in various ways. The poem has been famously criticized by Ciaran Carson (an Irish poet publishing at the same time as Heaney) for depicting colonization as "something as natural as a good fuck" (185).[2] However, the depiction of the intercourse is much more layered than Carson's claim seems to suggest. While it is not stated explicitly whether this intercourse happens with the consent of both parties, it is evident that the male speaker seems to enjoy the act, which can be noticed in phrases such as "I caress." The overall sensual description also adds to the impression of male pleasure. At the same time, the female figure suffers during the act, which can be noticed in Heaney's phrases such as "boom burst," "rendering," and "the battering ram." In Ireland, women's sexuality has been suppressed for a long time, and, therefore, this depiction can reinforce the perception of sex as only enjoyed by men. Furthermore, this manner of depicting a sexual relationship creates a dynamic in which women are only "passive vessels" that can be possessed actively by men. Women's bodies are in this way reduced to the role of servants of history whose responsibility is to passively create future generations (Walsh 5). It is also important to mention that this way of portraying the sexual act stands in opposition to the depictions of it in the early form of the *aisling* tradition (emerging in ancient Gaelic times) in which the woman entering the sexual union was the one with power as it was through the intercourse that she gave the power to rule over the land to the man. It was only when *aisling* began to change into a political nationalist poetry in the 18th century that the sexual

dynamic underwent a transformation, putting the female figure in the position of a passive victim of sexual violence (Cullingford 5–6).

Additionally, the underlying violence also affects the way pregnancy is depicted in the poem. The child conceived as a result of the sexual act brings pain and chaos both in the literal sense and in the allegorical one, since it can be seen as a symbol of Northern Ireland and its turbulent past and present (see Andrews, Corcoran, Morrison). In that way, pregnancy becomes dangerous and violent. This is an important aspect in relation to McGuckian's poetry, which generally celebrates pregnancy and maternity, contrasting these domestic joys with violence outside of the home.

Another poem in which Heaney politically engages with the *aisling* tradition is titled "Ocean's Love to Ireland" (Heaney 1975: 40–41)[3]. Similarly, to the "Act of Union," the poem refers to a historical situation by presenting it allegorically. This time, it alludes to Walter Raleigh, who, in the 16th century, arrived in Ireland to suppress a rebellion against British colonizers. Once again, the speaker in the poem is a male figure in the person of Raleigh and the Irish maiden remains silent until the last part of the poem, when she "complains" but does not try to rebel or produce a statement of her own. In this way, the female figure is confined to silence and passivity.

Another salient issue in the poem is the association of the female figure with the land, which is present throughout the whole text. First, lifting her clothes is compared to "weed lifting," and then the poem mentions "mushroom-flush." Finally, in the last verse, we can read about "the ground possessed and repossessed." This verse ultimately confirms the link between the Irish maiden and the land—in a way making the two equivalent. This connection can reinforce the perception of women as objects that can be rightfully taken by men and made into their own. Elizabeth Cullingford has pointed out that this divergence between female Nature and male Culture imprisons women and reduces them to objects rather than "speaking subject[s]" (1). The ground (soil, earth) is there to be possessed by humans—in this cultural context, especially

by men. In the Irish culture that has been strongly influenced by the Catholic Church, this relation between the ground and its ownership is especially strong. It is a consequence of the words written in the Book of Genesis, where the governing of the land according to human will is stated explicitly by God. Therefore, if a work of art compares or links women with land, it may give a signal that dominating them is the right given by God. As has already been mentioned in the analysis of the previous poem, there is a shift between the original form of the *aisling* and its politically weaponized version of the 18th century. In Gaelic times, the woman was the one who had the agency to transfer the power over the land from her to her male partner, while in the 18th century tradition, she was compared to the land, which turned her into an object to be possessed and repossessed.

Moreover, we can see a distinction between femininity perceived as nature (the land) and masculinity seen as embodying culture in the poem. The links between the female figure and the ground have been explained in the previous paragraph. In contrast, the male figure can be seen as close to culture by Heaney's use of phrases such as "his superb crest," "in London, his name will rise," and also in the mention of historical events such as the Siege of Smerwick in 1580. Raleigh might be particularly associated with two elements of culture: social hierarchy and language. Those two elements in Ireland have been inherently connected with power. Therefore, the association reinforces the perception of men as powerful beings who have the right to rule civilizations.

While in his statement Heaney claimed that the loss of sovereignty by Ireland is only temporary:

> an indigenous territorial numen, a tutelary of the whole island, call her Mother Ireland, Kathleen Ni Houlihan, the poor old woman, the Shan Van Vocht, whatever; [whose] sovereignty has been temporarily usurped or infringed by a new male cult whose founding fathers were Cromwell, William of Orange and Edward Carson… (1981: 57),

this poem does not show a sovereign entity, to begin with. Although there are some signs indicating that the female figure is struggling to overcome Raleigh's

violence (for example, her strands are "breathless"), all her attempts prove to be futile and Raleigh manages to rape her. However, the *aisling* way of depicting women as fragile creatures is an inaccurate representation, since Ireland's history and mythology feature many powerful women. A good example of such a figure is Grace O'Malley, who was "the legendary pirate queen of Connacht" (Murray 16). Moreover, Celtic mythology abounds in warrior queens and war goddesses.

As already mentioned, Heaney's poems can be juxtaposed with two poems by Medbh McGuckian: "The Hollywood Bed" and "The Heiress," in which the poetess strives to reverse the male gaze and give the female figure a chance to speak about her experiences. In these poems, McGuckian focuses on the domestic reality, but she also includes some historical references. In "The Hollywood Bed" (24) McGuckian alludes to some parts of the "Act of Union" and "Ocean's Love to Ireland."[4] The reference to the former is seen in the use of the word "imperial," which naturally has associations with the sentence "I am still imperially male" present in Heaney's previously analyzed poem (l. 6). Heaney connected two spheres in his poem—the national/historical and the intimate one—to allegorically portray an important moment in the history of Ireland (in a way making the female figure an instrument used to describe a historical narrative). McGuckian, however, turns her attention to home and struggles related to domestic life. There are some references that allude to those historical narratives, such as the word "imperial" or the comparison to Columbus, but the majority of images are associated with a sense of domesticity that is familiar and relatable in many aspects. Moreover, as in the *aisling* tradition of the 18th century a woman was treated as a source of inspiration, the grand narratives that women were forced into did not give them space to share their own desires and wants. As it has been observed by Aimeé Walsh, they were turned into "servants of history" (5). Therefore, turning attention to homes may give them a chance to speak about their experiences.

In my reading of the poem, the gender of the speaker is vital for McGuckian's play with the *aisling* tradition. Contrary to Heaney's poems, the speaker is female, which gives a woman a chance to share her perspective and gives voice to her experience. Both Heaney and McGuckian engage with the same imagery rooted in the *aisling* tradition, but while Heaney shows the female figure as a passive and silent personification of Ireland, McGuckian transforms her from a symbol to an entity with agency. However, interestingly, it is difficult to tell the gender of the speaker at the beginning of the poem, since there are no pronouns that indicate it. Furthermore, even though the speaker is focused on describing their partner, it is not entirely clear whether it is a man or a woman. Due to the use of the word "Columbus" in the poem and the traditional image of a relationship in this genre, one can assume that it is a male figure. Nevertheless, it is not stated explicitly in the poem. McGuckian's decision not to make gender evident for the reader can signal her disapproval of traditional gender roles and the relationship dynamic ascribed to them.

The change of the speaker's gender gives the female figure a chance to describe her feelings connected with the intercourse, which was not possible in Heaney's poems. As a result, the readers can observe how the woman struggles to assert her independence and agency, for example, by her position in bed: "I lie crosswise, imperial as a favored only child" (McGuckian 24). Subsequently, the readers are also confronted with the speaker's feelings of violation by her partner's actions. Those feelings are visible in the phrases she chooses to depict the beginning of the intercourse: "you blew open my tightened bud." This is another element that differentiates Heaney's poems from "The Hollywood Bed." Heaney's eroticisation of the political conquest is a tool to criticize the violence and injustice connected with it, but at the same time, it puts the female figure into a position of a "passive vessel" (as observed by Aimeé Walsh). In McGuckian's poem, sexual intimacy becomes the space for the woman to try and regain control over her sexuality while not idealizing the sexual act and still portraying it in an ambiguous way.

In addition, in the second stanza, there is a change from the male gaze to the female one, when the speaker observes her sleeping partner. It has been noted by Allison Garden that McGuckian is focused on the descriptive possibilities of language, which she connects with the image of the sleeping man: McGuckian reverses the male gaze by portraying the sleeping man as an object that can be constructed and modified with the power of language (1361). What might support Garden's remark is an observation included in Laura Mulvey's essay discussed above. Mulvey describes how "the erotic [is] coded into the language of the dominant patriarchal order" (8). If the interplay between the eroticization of women and the language is a factor contributing to the patriarchal dynamic of the male gaze, McGuckian gives the female speaker in her poem a chance to defy the said dynamic by making her the one with agency to use the language as a tool to describe and even modify the image of a sleeping man. The reversal of their roles is also evident in the last two lines of the poem: "the outline that if you were gone would find me in your place."

The domesticity conveyed in the poem can be seen as an enclosing space that creates a claustrophobic effect. This effect begins as soon as in the first line, when the speaker states: "we narrow into the house, the room, the bed." Furthermore, in later parts of the poem, there is a comparison between lovers and spoons in the drawer. McGuckian decided to look closely at the intimate and domestic sphere, which may prompt the readers to reinterpret the usual way of perceiving the female-male relationship by portraying it in a space which differs from the grand historical narrative. Furthermore, this imagery frees the female figure from being seen purely as a symbol and a "servant of history" (Walsh 5), because it focuses on her perspective, which has value even if it is not used to achieve a political aim.

"The Heiress"[5] (McGuckian 15) can be seen as a further exploration of the nation-as-woman trope (the *aisling* tradition). However, the allusions to Ireland and its struggles are more direct than those in the previously analyzed poem. The speaker in the poem is a female figure whose inner thoughts are revealed

to the readers. As a result, in contrast to most works connected with the *aisling* tradition, the woman is given a chance to express her feelings about the position she finds herself in.

There is a strong presence of restriction and lack of freedom, as the speaker is addressing an ambiguous "you," listing their commands directed to her. For instance, "[y]ou say I should stay out of the low fields" and "I should creep." It has also been suggested by Shane Alcobia-Murphy that the words "low" and "dark," used in the first stanza, are not descriptions but "moral indicators" (130). Both words can have multiple meanings: they can simply mean "close to the ground" and "with little light," respectively. However, they can also be used to describe moral categories, since low can mean "not honest or fair" and dark can stand for "evil or threatening." This could be a way of highlighting the demands for women to be pure and innocent, which can be referenced in the phrase "heart-shaped." These demands were also at the core of the *aisling* tradition; a woman in the poems inspired by the said tradition had to appear as the exact person the men wanted to see (Kiberd 294). Therefore, she had to be a personified perfection, and according to the culture of that time, that included being pure, obedient, and passive. The addressee of the poem (referred to as the mysterious "you") forbids the female figure to explore the land around her and justifies it by portraying the outside world as evil and dangerous. Yet, this may in fact be a way of manipulating her.

The comparison to Italian rooms, which are "no longer hurt by sun," in McGuckian's poem adds the aspect of forcibly created illusion because, in colloquial American speech, Italian rooms are the spaces which are usually separated from the rest of the house to trick guests into perceiving the hosts to be wealthier than they actually are ("Italian room"). This comparison could allude to the ideal version of a woman created partially by the *aisling* tradition and, therefore, suggests that it is a false image.

"The Heiress" makes a clear connection between women and land. First, the speaker talks about "the husbandry of a good spadesman" while observing a

man who is working on the land. This fragment alludes to Heaney's famous poem "Digging" (1966), in which, as has been observed by Mary Brown, the poet "celebrates the muscular activities of his father and grandfather who dug with a spade" (289). However, if we connect it with the subsequent fragment of the poem "my pinched grain hanging like a window on the smooth spot," we can sense the ambiguity. On the one hand, the man in this poem can simply work on the land, trying to provide for his family, as it was in the tradition of male, rural Ireland. On the other hand, we can read it as the male figure struggling to form his female partner according to the ideal he has in his mind, and in this reading, woman is symbolized as the land. Although the symbolism of perceiving the land (and nature) as female was often connected with portraying women as objects to be rightly possessed and conquered by men, McGuckian transforms its effect by mentioning "the birth of an heiress," which results in the "gobbling of land." It can be argued that "the gobbling of land" occurring during the process of childbirth depicts the disruption caused by freeing oneself from the norms of the surrounding reality. This is especially apparent when the readers consider that the child is also female, which could symbolize the emergence of a new generation of women whose struggle for their rights and freedoms will transform and challenge Irish society. This line can also be read in the historical context. Alcobia-Murphy pointed out that the ending of that poem may refer to the rivalry for the throne between Mary the Queen of Scots and her half-sister Elizabeth in the 16th century. Her observation was inspired by Antonia Fraser's book *Mary Queen of Scots*. The scholar also draws the readers' attention to the fact that the tense situation in the 16th century was connected with the growing antagonism between Catholics and Protestants. This could signal that McGuckian wanted to allude to the ongoing sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland. However, it is important to note that the poetess herself rejected this interpretation, claiming she does not think in sectarian terms (130–131).

Different scholars pointed out the importance of the scene in the poem when the speaker drops her "black acorn buttons." Their interpretations focus on different aspects, for example, Clair Wills sees them as a comparison to children, which can serve as a metaphor for poems. Those poems give their female author agency and influence by allowing her to express herself (72). On the other hand, Shane Alcobia-Murphy suggested the connection between dropping those buttons and the Irish Republican prisoners' protests which happened in the 1970s and 1980s. Those prisoners wanted to be treated not as regular convicts but as political prisoners and in an act of protest they were smearing their feces on walls. To support her hypothesis Alcobia-Murphy mentions McGuckian's interview in 1995 during which the poetess stated that the poem is "about the dirty protest" and that "black acorn buttons" are meant to refer to "shit" (a word she wanted to avoid in her poetry). The scholar argues that Republican prisoners were using their feces to regain political agency (132). This would mean that the speaker's act of dropping the buttons is an act of rebellion and showing her strength.

In conclusion, both Seamus Heaney and Medbh McGuckian engage with the themes rooted in the *aisling* tradition in the analyzed poems. The *aisling* tradition contributed to the patriarchal portrayal of women in Irish literature (as also noted by literary critics and feminists such as Elizabeth Cullingford, Aimee Walsh, and Patricia Coughlan, whose observations are mentioned earlier in this article) and might have reinforced some of the misogynistic stereotypes in Ireland. These Irish feminists and artists have also made an argument claiming that the "1980s counter-insurgence against women's liberation" was influenced by the nationalist ideology, including the *aisling* tradition (O'Connor 270). In "Act of Union" and "Ocean's Love to Ireland," Heaney gave voice to a male figure portrayed as a powerful entity who dominates the silent and vulnerable woman. The female figure's perspective is not present in these poems, and she is not given the chance to express her feelings. McGuckian, on the other hand, in the two poems analyzed in this article, gives voice to the

female figure. As a consequence, the readers gain deeper insight into the experiences of women in Ireland. The poetess focuses on describing intimacy and sensuality using a language which is at times cryptic and challenging to decode. Even though it is not a standard way of describing daily life, it changes the perspective of looking at the female figure and her experience.

There has been a tendency in Irish literature to associate women with land and landscape, which can reinforce the belief that women are objects meant to be rightfully conquered by men. While Heaney does not reverse or alter this connection between woman and land, McGuckian changes it to eliminate the patriarchal element. This is visible in her poem "The Heiress," where the speaker mentions "the gobbling of the land" as an outcome of "the birth of an heiress," which, as I have argued, can depict the disruption caused by the female rebellion against the social norm.

Heaney's and McGuckian's texts engage with the sexual aspect of the relationship. Both "Act of Union" and "The Hollywood Bed" make it unclear to the reader whether what happens in the poem is rape. Both poems also partially allude to the pain and suffering connected with birth. However, due to McGuckian's reversal of the speaker's gender, readers have the opportunity to learn about the woman's feelings regarding the intercourse. Additionally, the female figure is given more agency in how she behaves in the intimate situation; for example, she fights to assert her presence by lying "crosswise." In Heaney's poems, intercourse is an act that brings pleasure only to men, and only they are allowed to decide what is going to happen during it. McGuckian, on the other hand, highlights the woman's role in it and shows her emotions and sensations as well.

Seamus Heaney's and Medbh McGuckian's use of the *aisling* tradition can demonstrate how the same symbols can create different interpretations. It also showcases how the reversal of the potentially harmful symbols can point to important issues.

Endnotes

1. This poem has been examined by acclaimed literary critics, see: Armengol, Walsh, Coughlan.
2. This was also noted by Alison Garden in her paper "'Like a bee's sting or a bullet': eroticism, violence and the afterlives of colonial romance in Medbh McGuckian's The Flower Master and Other Poems (1993)."
3. This poem has been examined by other literary critics, see: Moloney, Parker, Annwn.
4. This poem has been examined by literary critics, such as Allison Garden and Elmery Kennedy-Andrews. Furthermore, Adam Hanna's book *Northern Irish Poetry and Domestic Space* shows how McGuckian draws on the interplay between domesticity and the political sphere in Northern Ireland, which is present in this poem.
5. This poem has been examined by acclaimed literary critics, see: Alcobia-Murphy, Wills, Fulford. Some critics have also pointed out to the historical symbolism (related to the history of Mary Queen of the Scots) that may be present in the poem. For contextual information see: Fraser.

References

"Aislinge." 2019. *eDIL 2019: An Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language*, based on the Contributions to a Dictionary of the Irish Language (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1913–1976). http://www.dil.ie, DOA: 06.12.2025.

"Aisling." 1996. *Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*. Ed. Robert Welch, 9. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Alcobia-Murphy, S. 2006. "'Re-Reading Five, Ten Times, the Simplest Letters': Detecting Voices in the Poetry of Medbh McGuckian," *Nordic Irish Studies* 5, 123–147.

Andrews, E. 1988. *All the Realms of Whisper: The Poetry of Seamus Heaney.* London: Macmillan.

Andrews, E. (Ed.) 1992. *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays*. London: Macmillan, 45–62.

Annwn, D. 1984. *Inhabited Voices: Myth and History in the Poetry of Geoffrey Hill, Seamus Heaney, and George Mackay Brown.* London: Bran's Head Books.

Apple, M. T. 2018. "Sacral Kingship and Feminine Fecundity: Allegorical Images of Ireland in Irish-Gaelic Aisling Poetry," *Ritsumeikan Journal of Language and Culture* 29: 4, 221–234.

Armengol, J. M. 2001. "Gendering the Irish Land: Seamus Heaney's 'Act of Union' (1975)," *Atlantis* 23: 1, 7–26.

Brazeau, R. J. 1999. "'Mired in Attachment': Cultural Politics and the Poetry of Seamus Heaney and Thomas Kinsella." PhD diss., McMaster University.

Brown, M. P. 1981. "Seamus Heaney and North," *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 70: 280, 289–298.

Carson, C. 1975. "Escaped from the Massacre?" *The Honest Ulsterman* Vol. 50, 183–186.

Corcoran, N. 1986. *A Student's Guide to Seamus Heaney.* London: Faber and Faber.

Coughlan, P. 1992. "Bog Queens: The Representation of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney," in: E. Andrews (Ed.), 45–62.

Cullingford, E. B. 2008. "Thinking of Her … as … Ireland: Yeats, Pearse and Heaney," *Textual Practice* 4: 1, 1–21.

Fraser, A. 1969. *Mary Queen of Scots.* London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

Fulford, S. 2002. *Gendered Spaces in Contemporary Irish Poetry.* Oxford: Peter Lang.

Garden, A. 2021. "Like a Bee's Sting or a Bullet: Eroticism, Violence and the Afterlives of Colonial Romance in Medbh McGuckian's *The Flower Master and Other Poems* (1993)," *Textual Practice* 36: 8, 1351–1373.

Hanna, A. 2015. *Northern Irish Poetry and Domestic Space.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Heaney, S. 1975. *North*. London: Faber and Faber.

Heaney, S. 1981. *Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968–1978*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Higgins, G. (Ed.) 2021. *Seamus Heaney in Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

"Italian room." *Urban Dictionary*, www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term =Italian+room, DOA 22.11.2025.

Jarniewicz, J. 2012. "Irlandki, córki faraona," in: *Sześć poetek irlandzkich*. Stronie Śląskie: Biuro Literackie, 175–176.

Kearney, R. 1986. "Poetry, Language and Identity: A Note on Seamus Heaney," *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 75: 300, 552–563.

Kelly, J. 1987. "The Origins of the Act of Union: An Examination of Unionist Opinion in Britain and Ireland, 1650–1800," *Irish Historical Studies* 25: 99, 236–263.

Kennedy-Andrews, E. 2012. *Writing Home: Poetry and Place in Northern Ireland, 1968–2008.* Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer.

Kiberd, D. 1997. *Inventing Ireland.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

McGuckian, M. 1993. *The Flower Master and Other Poems*. Dublin: Gallery Books.

Moloney, K. M. 1991. "Heaney's Love to Ireland," *Twentieth Century Literature* 37: 3, 273–288.

Morrison, B. 1983. *Seamus Heaney*. London: Methuen.

Mulvey, L. 1975. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16: 3, 6–18.

Murray, T. D. 2005. "Gráinne Mhaol, Pirate Queen of Connacht: Behind the Legend," *History Ireland* 13: 2, 16–20.

O'Connor, L. 2021. "The Feminine," in: G. Higgins (Ed.), 265–275.

Parker, M. 1993. *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet.* Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.

Quinlan, K. 1995. "Tracing Seamus Heaney." *World Literature Today* 69:1, 63–68.

Schrage-Früh, M. 2005. "An Interview with Medbh McGuckian," *Contemporary Literature* 4:1, 1–17.

Walsh, A. 2020. "'Curiosity with Corpses': Poetry, Nationalism and Gender in Seamus Heaney's *North* (1975) and Medbh McGuckian's *The Flower Master* (1982)," *Journal of Gender Studies* 1–13. https://doi.org/ 10.1080/09589236.2020.1831441.

Walter, K. 2013. "From Aisling to Chora: Female Allegories of the Nation in Contemporary Irish Women's Poetry," *Irish Studies Review* 21: 3, 313–325.

Wills, C. 1993. *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Abstract

Literature in the socio-political context has been frequently adopted as a weapon against women. It has depicted them as "servants of history," existing to please men and produce the next generations (Walsh 5). Sometimes, this war inflicted on women was tenacious with colonizers' attempts to enslave the nations that they conquered. This correlation between sexism and colonialism was present in Ireland, where women were subjugated both to the rules of British colonizers and to Irish men desiring to confine them to their homes. One of the literary traditions contributing to the control of Irish women was the *aisling* tradition [the word *aisling* means a vision or a dream; it originated as a Gaelic literary genre connected with love and sovereignty]. The main focus of the aisling is the image of Ireland personified as an ideal woman who comes to Irish men in their dreams, urging them to fight for their country. In modern times, Irish feminists started to point out how the *aisling* tradition imprisoned women culturally and suppressed their sexuality. Consequentially, Irish women writers have been striving to reverse the profound impact that a variety of literary texts, including this tradition, exerted on the worldview of Irish people.

This article will present the ways in which Medbh McGuckian reverses the *aisling* tradition to give women agency and voice, and juxtapose them with Seamus Heaney's poetry (especially his two poems: "The Act of Union" and "Ocean's Love to Ireland"). Furthermore, it will reflect on the transformation from the "male gaze" in Heaney's poems to "female action" in McGuckian's poems. The analysis will encompass two of her poems: "The Hollywood Bed" and "The Heiress," in the framework of literary criticism from acclaimed feminist scholars such as Clair Wills, Alison Garden, and Aimée Walsh. It will also comment on the origins of the term *male gaze* to contextualize the discussion around it.